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ABSTRACT

This study polled 35 early childhood educators pursuing master's degrees in early childhood special education or early intervention concerning the integration of typically-developing children with those who have special needs. A nine-item survey questionnaire was developed to assess the educators attitudes concerning the benefits of such integration. A total of 32 of the 35 educators strongly agreed or agreed that benefits included typically-developing and special needs children serving as role models for each other and typical children serving as language models for children with special needs. Only 22 of the educators strongly agreed or agreed that integrated classrooms encouraged parents of special needs children to have more realistic expectations for their children. (Contains 17 references.) (MDM)

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Why is Integration in Early Childhood Special Education Beneficial?

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to poll Early Childhood teachers and gain their input on integrating typically developing children with those who have special needs. Thirty-five teachers were given a questionnaire and asked to rate how beneficial integration was to the children in an early childhood classroom.

Why is Integration in Early Childhood Special Education Beneficial?

Integration in Early Childhood Special Education is the process of bringing typically developing children into the classroom of children with special needs or handicaps. It is infact a kind of reverse mainstreaming process. The trend in education today is for all students to be included in one classroom. This inclusion process is said to benefit not only the children with handicaps but also the typical children. Integration is a way for "inclusion" to begin at the early childhood level.

While the research literature has indicated that simply placing the child with handicaps with typically developing children does not guarantee interaction, structured interaction where the handicapped child acquires new behaviors by observing and modifying more competent behaviors of other children is possible (Dunlop, Stoneman & Cantrell, 1980).

During the investigation for this topic it was discovered that not only do children with handicaps benefit from integration but typically developing children and parents do as well.

Parent of normally developing children seem to have more positive attitudes towards people with disabilities, when their children are in an integrated setting .And parents of young children with handicaps are generally pleased with an experience that is integrated because their child has the opportunity to develop friendships with peers of the same age (Strain 1988).

Voelt (1980) found that when typically developing children were provided time to interact with children who have special needs, these typically developing children had better attitudes towards the handicapped children and also had a more accurate understanding of their capabilities.

Typically developing students were shown to progress at the expected rate,

even when integrated with children with disabilities. Odom, Deklyen & Jenkins (1984) discovered that no negative effects occur for normally developing children just because they are educated in an integrated program.

The major focus of this research was to investigate the benefits of integration for early childhood students with disabilities. There is already quite a lot of information on the subject and I would like to discuss it now.

Jenkins, Odom & Speltz (1989) believe that there are significant benefits to language development and social competence. The typically developing children use language and behaviors which are developmentally appropriate. The special needs children are able to watch and hear this and model similar behaviors.

Preschoolers with mild developmental delays and hearing impairments have been found to engage in higher rates of peer-related social behaviors and more constructive play when placed in an integrated play setting as opposed to a non-integrated setting (Guralnick & Groom 1987; 1988).

Other benefits to integrating typically developing children with special needs children include: improved interpersonal skills, enhanced self-esteem, increased independence and improved interactional behaviors. As you can see most of the literature has found the major benefit to integration to be in the area of social behavior. This alone is very important ,especially at the early childhood level. There is very little research to support the idea that students learn more basic skills in an integrated program.

The research supports my belief that integration is important in an early childhood classroom, I am now interested in what teachers in early childhood classrooms think.

My research question is:

Why is integration in Early Childhood Special Education Beneficial?

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were 35 Early Childhood Education majors. All the participants were in the process of gaining a Master's Degree in Early Childhood Special Education or Early Intervention. At the time of this study 31 of the participants taught in early childhood classrooms and 4 did not.

Materials

I developed an Early Childhood Integration Questionnaire. The first part of the questionnaire related to information about the participant completing the survey. The second part of the questionnaire was a Likert type scale in which the teacher rated benefits to integration. The participant was either to strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree to each of the benefits listed. The last part of the questionnaire was a question asking the participant if he or she had any other reasons integration might or might not be beneficial.

Procedures

All the participants in the study were either in college classes with me or had been in classes with me previously. I contacted these teachers by going to the classes they were presently in and asking them if they would be interested in being part of my research.

I gave each participant the questionnaire and waited while he or she filled it out. I had a 100% return rate because I personally waited for the surveys.

The participants filled in the biographical information first. This section included: What was your present teaching position? What school system and county

do you teach in? Do you integrate typically developing children with children who have special needs? Do you feel integration is important? What type of integration do you do? When this was completed they rated benefits to integration which were listed on the second page. These benefits were rated 4= strongly agree, 3= agree, 2= disagree or 1= strongly disagree. Lastly the teachers were asked to give any other reasons integration was or was not important in Early Childhood Special Education.

Results

The data collected was analyzed to see if the teachers felt the benefits listed on the survey were truly benefits to integrating typically developing and special needs children in the same classroom. Table 1 provides the data and the percentages obtained from the questionnaire.

The statement which drew the greatest disagreement was statement #7 (Parents' attitudes toward people with disabilities is more positive). 6% of the teachers polled strongly disagreed with this statement. Statement #1 (The children are role models for each other) produced the strongest agreement. 80% of the teachers polled strongly agreed with this statement. If we combine the strongly agree and agree scores for each statement we can see that overall the participants felt these items listed were indeed benefits to integration.

Place Table 1 about here

Discussion

The findings of this study indicated that teachers of Early Childhood Special Education or those studying to be Early Childhood Special Educators feel integration i

is a beneficial process.

Some of the participants commented on benefits they saw in their programs which weren't listed on the survey. Those benefits included:

1. The children are able to look above the differences of peers at an early age.
2. Typical children appreciate the differences and see how much ability they have. They often become very helpful to the other children.
3. It makes people in the community more aware of others with special needs.

One participant did comment on something which was not a benefit to integration. I felt it was worth mentioning because even though all the research I have done states that integration is important and benefits the children, I am sure there are cases that don't support this idea. This particular participant felt many of her typically developing children "picked up" the inappropriate behaviors of the special needs children. Even though these were her feelings, she still felt integration was worth it.

In summary, although my study was on a relatively small population of Early Childhood Special Educators,I believe the results would apply if it were duplicated on a large scale. Research has supplied us with data indicating that integration is beneficial for special needs children, typically developing children and parents of both groups. I expected many of the benefits I listed to coincide with that of my research. My expectations were correct.

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Table 1

Teacher Agreement Regarding Benefits of Integration (n=35)

Statements	% Responses SA	A	Combined	D	SD
1. The children are role models for each other.	28 (80%)	4 (11%)	91%	3 (9%)	0 (0%)
2. Children are introduced to others who are different.	26 (74%)	8 (23%)	97%	1 (3%)	0 (0%)
3. Typical children are language models for children with special needs.	21(60%)	13 (37%)	97%	1 (3%)	0 (0%)
4. Children can be social role models for each other.	24 (69%)	9 (26%)	95%	2 (5%)	0 (0%)
5. Teacher's expertise will broaden.	13 (37%)	17 (49%)	86%	5 (14%)	0 (0%)
6. Parents' attitudes toward people with disabilities is more positive.	11 (31%)	15 (43%)	74%	7 (20%)	2 (6%)
7. Teacher's expectations of the abilities of special needs students are more realistic.	5 (14%)	21 (60%)	74%	8 (23%)	1 (3%)
8. Parents expectations of their special needs child are more realistic.	3 (9%)	19 (54%)	63%	13 (37%)	0 (0%)
9. Children can be role models for appropriate behavior.	13 (37%)	16 (46%)	83%	6 (17%)	0 (0%)

Note. SA= Strongly Agree A= Agree D= Disagree SD=Strongly Disagree
The combined is the percentage of the Strongly Agree and Agree category.